

## The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

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# The Engineers' Bookshelf

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*I have asked W. Edson Richmond, a graduate assistant in the Department of English, to write a review of Mr. Hayakawa's "Language in Action," one of the most talked of books to be published during the last few months. Because Mr. Richmond's principle interest lies in the field of linguistics, he is, I believe, highly qualified to do this job. Born in New Hampshire and graduated from Miami University in 1939, Mr. Richmond has his M. A. degree from the Ohio State University. At the present he is working toward his doctorate.*

S. I. Hayakawa, *Language in Action*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941.

[Reviewed by W. Edson Richmond]

In 1938 Stuart Chase brought forth from his very prolific pen a book called *The Tyranny of Words* (Harcourt, Brace and Company) in which he profoundly called attention to what he thought was a new study: the science of semantics. As usual (and this is not meant to be a condemnation of Mr. Chase, for popularizers are often the only link between scientists and the layman), Mr. Chase leaned heavily upon other men, notably Count Alfred Korzybski (*Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, Science Press Printing Company, 1933), and C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (*The Meaning of Meaning*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, third edition, revised, 1930). Semantics in the past usually designated the study of the meanings in words. Korzybski, Ogden, and Richards took the term semantics out of its compartment in linguistics and applied it to any sign-or-symbol system of statement or communication; Mr. Chase gave the re-application of the term immense popularization. The public, in fact, took the re-discovered study so much to heart that it became a fad equally as popular and misunderstood as the psychological studies of the late 1920's and early 1930's. It was in partial protest to the oversimplification of the problem of word-meanings, to the feeling engendered by Mr. Chase's book that one need only find the thing (referent) for each word (symbol) to have a completely unambiguous language, that such books as *Semantics* by Hugh Walpole, *Language Habits and Human Affairs* by Irving J. Lee, and most

notably *Language in Action* by S. I. Hayakawa were written.

The tangible data readily available in historical dictionaries and comparative grammars demonstrate the wholly arbitrary relationship between words and things, as well as the perpetual possibility and frequent occurrence of drastic change in the denotation and connotation of words. Only the surface thinkers who fail to realize that language is an expression of a changing universe claim that we can overcome ambiguity by applying a single word to a single thing. Such thinking refuses to recognize the eternal flux, for, as Mr. Hayakawa says:

It must not be overlooked that our highest ratiocinative [argumentative] and imaginative powers are derived from the fact that symbols are independent of things symbolized, so that we are free not only to go quickly from low to extremely high levels of abstraction (from 'canned peas' to 'groceries' to 'commodities' to 'national wealth') and to manipulate symbols even when the things they stand for cannot be so manipulated . . . but we are also free to manufacture symbols at will even if they stand only for abstractions made from other abstractions and not for anything in the extensional world.

Thus, and this is the thesis of Mr. Hayakawa's book, although we are easily misled not only by the words which we now use but also by the feelings which many words engender, it is not necessary for us to tie each word to one meaning, to refuse to use the so-called "abstract words" in order to overcome language difficulties. We need only to recognize that these difficulties exist and to carefully watch for them when we speak or write.

Mr. Hayakawa draws from Korzybski a simile of 'map' and 'territory'. The world that comes to us through words, the verbal world, should correspond exactly to the world that comes to us through our experience, the extensional world.

Now this verbal world ought to stand in relation to the extensional world as a map does to the territory it is supposed to represent. If the child grows to adulthood with a verbal world in his head which corresponds fairly closely to the extensional world that he finds around him in his widening experience, he is in relatively small danger of being

shocked or hurt by what he finds, because his verbal world has told him what, more or less, to expect. He is prepared for life. If, however, he grows up with a false map in his head—that is, with a head crammed with false knowledge and superstition—he will constantly be running into trouble, wasting his efforts, and acting like a fool. He will not be adjusted to the world as it is; he may, if the lack of adjustment is serious, end up in an insane asylum.

Perhaps the consequences of an inaccurate map may not be so serious as Mr. Hayakawa suggests, however, it is especially important for a scientist (or an engineer) to watch his **maps** both of the past and of the future (for predictions made from previous experience and research are maps of the future) very closely.

The neophyte scientists are apt to be so indoctrinated with this passion for accuracy that he throws into discard all such 'impractical' and 'inaccurate' studies as history and literature. He does not realize the near impossibility of communication when the literature of any culture is unknown.

One of the reasons, therefore, that the young in every culture are made to study the literature and history of their own linguistic or national groups is that they may be able to understand and share in the communications of the group. Whoever, for example, fails to understand such statements as 'He is a regular Benedict Arnold,' or 'The President of the corporation is only a Charlie McCarthy; the Bergen of the outfit is the general manager,' is in a sense an outsider to the popular cultural traditions of contemporary America. Similarly, **one** who fails to understand passing allusions to well-known figures in European or American history, to well-known lines in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, or the King James version of the Bible . . . may be said in the same sense to be an outsider to an important part of the traditions of the English-speaking people. The study of history and literature, therefore, is not merely the idle acquisition of polite accomplishment in order to be able to impress people, as 'practical' men are fond of believing, but a necessary means of both increasing the efficiency of our communications and of increasing our understanding of what others are trying to say to us.

Such things as these, however, are but part of the primary message of the book. Only when we realize that words are the essential **instruments** of man's humanity, and only when we learn to treat words as **instruments** and not **things**, will we be able to speak accurately and read intelligently. In times such as these when the world is flooded with high sounding propaganda, it behooves us all to read and re-read **Language in Action**, and to apply and re-apply the principles which Mr. Hayakawa brings forth, first to the problems presented at the end of each chapter and then to the world of words about us.